



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress Uniformed Services University School of Medicine

TEACHERS HELPING STUDENTS: LISTENING AND TALKING

The magnitude of death and destruction in this event require special attention to communicating with children and adolescents. Physical safety and security always take priority.

School is an important normalizing experience for children and adolescents. It is difficult to predict the kinds of psychological problems that children and adolescents will have; however, the following management plan may help minimize later difficulties:

- Every student has a different way of responding to trauma. It is not advisable to require the same response of everyone. Listen to your students' stories.
- Maintain daily routines to the extent possible. Now is not the time to introduce new routines. Familiar schedules can be reassuring.
- Your response to the disaster will affect your student's response; therefore, it is helpful to discuss your own reactions with other adults and teachers before talking with your students.
- Provide structured time to discuss the event in the classroom. Be alert to students expressing overwhelming feelings in discussions. Limiting time can help the student express what they wish and not more than they might wish they had.
- Maintaining the usual classroom routines can be comforting. Even regular schoolwork can also provide some sense of familiarity and comfort to some students.
- Encourage school faculty and staff to discuss and plan classroom interventions together.
- Be available to meet individually with your students.
- Discuss the event in an open honest manner with your students. Children might want to talk intermittently, and younger children might need concrete information to be repeated.
- Limit exposure to television and other sources of information about the disaster and its victims. Too much exposure increases distress through overidentification.
- Help students limit the extent to which they personalize or identify with the victims or the situation. Remind students that they are safe at school. To decrease overidentification with the victims provide concrete information about how they differ from the people involved in the disaster.
- Engage your students in conversations of their choosing – not necessarily about their feelings or the scene. Talking about the normal events of life is central to health.
- Increase your students' sense of control and mastery at school. Let them plan a special activity.
- Older children and adolescents may feel "stirred up". Helping them understand their behavior and setting limits at school can help.
- Some children may respond by being distracted or having trouble remembering things. These should be tolerated and understood.

- Be alert to changes in students' usual behavior (e.g., drop in grades, loss of interest, not doing homework, increased sleepiness or distraction, isolating themselves, weight loss or gain).

TEACHERS HELPING STUDENTS: TECHNIQUES FOR THE CLASSROOM

For Younger Students:

- Reassure younger students that they are safe and that their parents and other adults will take care of them.
- Fearful younger students may need to touch base with their parents from time to time throughout the day during the early stages following the crisis.
- Acknowledge questions about the death and the destruction.
- Acknowledge your student's feelings: "You sound sad/angry/worried..." "Are you sad/ angry/ worried?"
- At a time when you are feeling calm and able to listen and share with your students, acknowledge that you, too, may feel sad, angry, or worried.
- Lead discussions that will help younger students gain a sense of mastery and security. "You have asked good questions." "That was a good idea." "Your family/Mom/Dad knows how to take good care of this."

For Older Students:

- Acknowledge the importance of peers in helping to re-establish normalcy.
- For many teens, their cognitive abilities are often greater than their emotional capacity to manage highly stressful situations. Expect emotional swings.
- Remember the importance of providing emotional support by "naming" the expectable reactions of sadness, numbness, anger, fear, and confusion. Explain how inappropriate giddiness, laughter, or callousness often are used to distance ourselves from becoming overwhelmed.
- Help your middle and high school students reframe their expressions of rage or despair. Focus on helping them to find positive solutions to the situation. Coordinating memorial ceremonies or special school assemblies or donating their time and creativity to fundraising, blood drives etc., are ways your students can learn the benefits of altruism to themselves and to their communities.